

StarTribune - Opinion Exchange

Minnesota, it's high time for paid medical leave

Too many people, especially people of color and American Indians, don't have it. And it's not just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing.

By Nathan Chomilo

FEBRUARY 26, 2019 — 2:52PM

Four pounds, 10 ounces. Our son was smaller than a bag of potatoes, and they were telling us he was ready to leave the hospital. Even as a board-certified pediatrician and a pediatric nurse, we found the thought of bringing him home daunting. Would he keep growing? What if he had issues feeding or my wife had issues keeping up her breast-milk supply?

However, some questions that weren't front and center for us worry thousands of families in Minnesota in similar situations: Can I afford to stay home with my newborn? For how long? Whom do I trust to care for my infant child?

Parents and families face these questions because in Minnesota 74 percent of children have all their parents in the workforce, yet there are no federal or state requirements for employers to provide paid sick time or paid family leave. This hits low-wage-earners the hardest, as most do not have access to paid leave. In fact, 63 percent of full-time and 67 percent of part-time workers report they would face significant economic hardship if they had to take time without pay to care for a new baby, care for an ill loved one or deal with their own health issue.

This leaves many Minnesotans struggling to care for loved ones when they are ill, while also trying to put food on the table and keep the lights on. Often families are forced into tough decisions that place finances above health or time with ailing family members. Or, as in the case of one of my patients, above one's own health.

Bob was admitted to the hospital because of a complication from his dialysis treatment for kidney failure. He was a relatively young man who had a family at home and was the main provider for them. He had been on dialysis for four years and shared that he hadn't even started the process of getting a transplant because he knew he couldn't afford to take the time off necessary for the surgery and recovery.

Bob had already had a handful of hospitalizations since starting dialysis and that had moved his family "to the edge" financially. He is an otherwise healthy individual whose life, health and time as a financially independent and contributing member of our state could be significantly extended by the security that paid medical leave would provide.

Paid medical leave would be truly life-changing, and potentially life-saving, to thousands of Minnesotans.

In addition to the benefits of paid medical leave, there is ample evidence that paid family/parental leave improves rates of breast feeding, infant bonding and development and vaccination rates, while lowering racial health disparities, infant mortality and premature births. These are among the many reasons that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) counts paid parental leave as one of the three policies critical to support young children's healthy brain development.

Unfortunately, in Minnesota, the ability to take paid leave is yet another gap in opportunity experienced by Minnesotans of color and American Indians, as the structural racism our society has been built on has left us more likely than white Minnesotans to be in low-paying, less secure jobs with fewer benefits.

Paid medical and family leave is therefore an opportunity to address the wide racial health inequities and disparities we continue to face.

Our little sack of potatoes is now a bouncing, bubbly 2-year-old. Even as a physician, my job only provides two weeks of paid parental leave for fathers (far short of UNICEF's recommendation). My wife received short-term disability for 12 weeks, but given complications of our pregnancy and our son's early arrival, she would have had to return to work when he was not yet to his due date.

We made the decision for her to stay home. I took extra time off that my coworkers and colleagues generously helped cover so I could be at home with my family. These are luxuries the majority of Minnesotans lack access to. And our co-workers' generosity is no substitute for justice.

All Minnesotans deserve the opportunity to take time to heal, care for loved ones and give their children the best start possible. The proposed Paid Family and Medical Leave Act (HF5) would be one step toward a more equitable and family-focused Minnesota for years to come.

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